

## Book Review: Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism and Blackness in Mexico

Blog Admin

*Land of the Cosmic Race* is a richly-detailed ethnographic account of the powerful role that race and colour play in organizing the lives and thoughts of ordinary Mexicans. It presents a previously untold story of how individuals in contemporary urban Mexico construct their identities, attitudes, and practices in the context of a dominant national belief system. Carefully presented and self-consciously written, this is an excellent book for anyone with an interest in how Mexican racial politics can be seen to operate on the ground, finds **Zalfa Feghali**.



**Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico. Christina A. Sue. Oxford University Press. March 2013.**

### Find this book:

One prevailing fact of studying race in the Americas is that the discussion almost always turns to the US as a reference point. Studies of racial dynamics in the Americas are – obviously – rich, necessary, and often sidelined in favour of these more popular ways of thinking about race. [Christina A. Sue](#)'s *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism and Blackness in Mexico* attempts to redress this imbalance by complicating and problematising the dynamics of racial mixture in Mexico. Primarily an ethnographic study, this book offers new ways of thinking about race studies in the Mexican context.

The book's title, which Sue discusses but doesn't fully unpack, is taken from a provocative work by Jose Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, published in 1925. Vasconcelos' views on *mestizaje* – racial mixture – are key to understanding the dominant ideological logic behind Mexico's national(ist) relationship with race. In *The Cosmic Race*, Vasconcelos sees the vast potential of (specifically) Mexicans as mestizos, and lauds them for their mestizo/a (mixed race, specifically Spanish and Indigenous) character. Significantly, he also casts the mestizos as the first stage in the creation of a new, cosmic race that will eventually take on characteristics and subsume the genetic streams of "all the races." According to his logic, this cosmic race would take on the best or most desirable traits from each respective race and eventually lines between the "original" races will blur to the point that any one individual's "racial heritage" would be completely indistinguishable from another's, thus becoming the ultimate mestizo/a (something akin what some might now call a post-ethnic or post-racial world). Vasconcelos' underlying premise is that there are four races of humans: the Black, the Indian (Indigenous), the Mongol, and the White. Out of these four races, [Vasconcelos imagines](#) that the fifth, mestizo, cosmic race will resemble





*a symphony: Voices that bring accents from Atlantis; depths contained in the pupil of the red man, who knew so much, so many thousand years ago, but now seems to have forgotten everything. His soul resembles the old Mayan cenote of green waters, laying deep and still... This infinite quietude is stirred with the drop put in our blood by the Black, eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust... There also appears the Mongol, with the mystery of his slanted eyes that see everything according to a strange angle... The clear mind of the White, that resembles his skin and his dreams, also intervenes...*

This expression of anti-white supremacist but still entirely racist nationalism was common in Mexico at the time and laid the groundwork for an ideological framework that continues today. Sue describes this groundwork as based on three key ideas: “(1) *mestizaje*, the embracement of race mixture and lauding of the *mestizo*; (2) non-racism, the contention that racism does not exist in the country; and (3) nonblackness, the marginalization, neglect, or negation of Mexico’s African heritage” (p.14). It is these three “pillars” of nationalism that Sue examines over the course of the book, which features a range of anecdotal ethnographic material that Sue collected over the course of her fieldwork in Veracruz, Mexico.



Mural – Veracruz, Mexico. Credit: [The Way of Slow Travel](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Divided into 9 chapters, Sue uses the three pillars of Mexican nationalism as pivots for her study and makes central “the racial common sense of Mexican mestizos” (p.6). Sue convincingly argues that “to understand Mexican racial dynamics and related inequality, it is essential to address colour” and describes Mexico as “a pigmentocracy” (p.6). By treating colour “as an analytic subset of race” (p.7), Sue is able to successfully investigate how what she calls the non-elite mestizo/a population in Mexico perpetuate these national myths, despite the negative impact they have on a vast portion of the population (to say the least).

Essentially, what Sue does in this book is to undermine claims that racism does not exist in Mexico. What is fascinating about her study is the ways in which she shows that racism is manifested. For example, in chapter 2, Sue maps the terminology of Veracruz's race-colour terrain, noting that Veracruzans do not employ a racial vocabulary, but a colour vocabulary, what she calls "colour talk." What she discovers is that Veracruzanos speak in terms of pigment rather than perceived racial difference: the difference, for example, between calling a group of dark-skinned people "*negros*" [describing perceived race] and "*morenos*" [describing observed skin colour]. When asked about their own racial identification, Sue's interview subjects struggled to engage with *racial* terminology, finding it much easier to describe their colour. This functions to continue to propagate the idea that Mexico's focus on *mestizaje* has in fact led to the eradication of racism.

That being said, however, Sue disputes this especially well in chapter 6, in which she examines the role of blackness in a so-called mestizo nation. What Sue finds again is that the Veracruzanos she interviews are able to "mobilize a series of discourses" that effectively maintain "a consistency with the national belief system" (p.115) – that blackness does not exist in Mexico (despite the indisputable fact that it does). Significantly, in order to do this, Veracruzanos "import racialized images of others, mainly African Americans and Afro-Cubans, to represent authentic blackness" (p.116).

Ultimately, Sue's findings shed light on just how much more work there is to be done on the question race in the Americas. How are what she calls "globalized notions of race" mediated by local politics and global media? How does this impact the scholarly terrain of race studies? And why do some people whose lived experiences are negatively affected by these processes continue to stake them out, defending and maintaining them?

In this book Christina A. Sue is able to clarify some of the many complexities of racial mixture, race, colour, and national identity in the Mexican context. Sue is extremely self-reflexive about her methodology and the challenges faced over the course of her fieldwork and as a result, the book is extremely readable and genuinely interesting. Carefully presented and self-consciously written, this is an excellent book for anyone with an interest in how Mexican racial politics can be seen to operate *on the ground*.

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**Zalfa Feghali** holds a PhD in American Studies from the University of Nottingham for a thesis on the relationship between contemporary American and Canadian poetry, citizenship, and civic acts of reading. Her current research considers the role of the reader in the crafting of 9/11 novels. She is editorial assistant at the Journal of American Studies, and is on the Editorial Committee of the Open Library of the Humanities ([www.openlibhums.org](http://www.openlibhums.org)). She is an avid ukulele player and can be followed on twitter [@zalface](https://twitter.com/zalface). [Read more reviews by Zalfa](#).

